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ABSTRACT

This paper presents ways in which critical thinking can be taught in a communication studies class using cultural studies. The understanding of culture provided by E. Hall (who stressed the importance of self-reflexivity) and R. Williams (whose theory of culture involves relations between elements in a whole way of life) is useful to communication studies assignments and teaching critical thinking. An assignment that gets students to think more critically about their own culture(s) involves having them take a critical look at a game, toy, or sport they remember from childhood and see what it says about their culture is presented. Teachers can draw on examples from their own experience. One way to get students communicating in self-reflexive ways about culture is to expose them to cultural studies essays on similar topics. Since it is difficult to be self reflexive (due to cultural bias), it is important for teachers to lay out a theory of culture and cultural studies, to share personal examples, and to provide exemplar essays so that students can produce quality cultural studies analyses. (RS)

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Panel: Facing the Liberal Arts Challenge:
Using Cultural Studies to Teach Critical Thinking
in the Communication Studies Classroom
(Sponsor: Small Colleges)
AND
Teaching Critical Thinking About Communication
Through Cultural Studies
(Sponsor: States Advisory
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Paper: Cultural Studies and Classroom Assignments I

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How do you teach critical thinking using cultural studies in a communication studies class? This paper is one attempt to answer this question, though teachers in other fields might just as easily make use of the exercise described. I will start with some perspectives on culture and cultural studies, show how these perspectives are useful in the classroom, and provide an assignment that uses these perspectives to get students to think more critically about their own culture(s).

The terms culture and cultural studies have been used in many ways. My particular definitions of these terms draw from Edward Hall and Raymond Williams. Hall provides a communicative definition of culture, and shows how different cultures form, flow, and flower in different ways--particularly cultures with differing ethnic and genetic elements. Williams extends Hall's understanding of culture by applying it to a variety of institutions, and by focusing on the importance of self-reflexivity.

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In his work, The Silent Language, Edward Hall showed how "other" regional and national cultures differed from cultures in the U.S. --particularly in terms of time and space. He explained the failure of Americans to successfully deal with other people when sent abroad as the result of a focus on formal training in the language, history, government, and customs of a culture. Of equal importance to this, Hall claimed, was an introduction to the non-verbal language of that culture, "the elaborate patterning of behavior which prescribes our handling of time, our spatial relationships, our attitudes toward work, play, and learning . . . our silent language--the language of behavior" (Hall, 1959, p. 10) Hall's metaphor for culture was music. He claimed a person couldn't really "know" a culture without experiencing it because they would miss the spatial and temporal nuances that make it what it is (Hall, 1959, p. 13).

A pioneering work in its day, Hall's text tried to avoid stereotyping non U.S. cultures and to recognize the complexity of these cultures. It provided needed insights into the importance of cultural differences and it criticized ethnocentrism. Finally, it helped people see culture as a kind of flow rather than as a static collection of facts or artifacts. Current definitions of culture owe much to Hall's conceptualization.

To this conception of culture, Raymond Williams contributes a theory of culture as a theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life (Williams, 1961, p. 12). In that sense, culture doesn't necessarily or only have to refer to differences tied to race, ethnicity, or nationality. As an anthropologist, Hall

focused on these differences. Williams, on the other hand, looked at cultures (and sub-cultures) as made up of the practices of everyday life--the routine, mundane elements of institutional cultures like the family, schools, work, religions, and other groups. These practices would include everything from a daily cleansing and/or clothing and make-up practices, to family ceremonies, group rituals and/or gatherings, institutional practices and traditions, and/or other typical ways of doing things related to practices that others may or may not share.

The understanding of culture provided by Hall and Williams is useful to communication studies assignments and teaching critical thinking. Williams in particular stresses the importance of self-reflexivity. For Williams, it is not just other cultures that need to be understood in order for the U.S. to more successfully deal with them, but one's own culture that needs to be understood, critiqued, improved, and made more humane. Though the study of "other" (non-U.S.) cultures is important, it can often lead to ethnocentrism. Brief and/or half-baked studies of "foreign," "ethnic," or "other," cultures may lead students to an undeservedly deepened sense of self-worth. Teachers may find students saying, "Gee those "X"'s really have an odd way of life--OUR or MY way seems so much more reasonable and sensible.

The understanding of culture and cultural studies presented here, however, works at getting you and your students to study your own culture(s)--those flows of practices within which you are literally immersed. They help students and teachers from falling

into easy ethnocentric traps and encourage picking local, almost too likely, sites of analysis. Such sites are places where rituals, rules, everyday practices, ceremonies, and/or gatherings are commonplace and easy to explore.

Assignment Example

What follows is an assignment using the understanding of culture provided above to get students to think more critically about their own culture(s). The site of analysis suggested for this assignment is actually a collection of sites: games, toys, and sports. Few kids have grown up without exposure to some sort of organized game, sport, or toy. But to take a critical look at that game, sport, or toy and to ask what it says about the culture from which a person emerges is something quite different.

In this assignment, I ask students to think of a toy, game, or sport they remember from childhood. It could be anything from Rock-em Sock-em Robots to My Pretty Pony to Mortal Combat to Police Trainer to Super Mario Brothers to Ms. Pac Man. The toy, game, or sport need not be one the student actually played or played with--sometimes toys and games are more memorable precisely because they were beyond reach for whatever reason. It does help, however, if the student has a vivid memory of details, if he or she can find a version of, or more information about the toy, game, or sport.

Next, I ask the student to think about what that toy says about the culture from which it emerged. Did it reflect a

particular historical moment? Did it complicate or solidify particular gender roles? Did it have implications for a particular way of thinking, way of being in the world, and/or way of seeing the world (lens of class, nation, biology, etc.). At this point, I provide examples.

I draw examples from my own experience and I even bring in the toy or game when I can. For instance, as a child, I enjoyed playing a game called "Master Mind." The picture on the top of the box shows a well-dressed bearded man seated at a table with his hands in the gesture of a steeple. Standing behind him is an Asian woman in an elegant dress. Both seem to be staring at and challenging the player.

The game of Master Mind is a game of reason. There are six code pegs of different colors, a board with a strip of holes four across, twelve steps of code pegs available for guessing, holes for key pegs next to each of the twelve steps available for guessing, and a hidden key. The trick of the game is to guess the code of the hidden key by using key peg responses and logic to figure out the colors and arrangements of the hidden key pegs.

Master Mind is an interesting site for cultural study and critique. For one thing, the game requires no speech. The purely rational nature of Master Mind allows it to transcend language barriers and the lid announces that the game is available in ten different countries. Yet that also makes the game essentially individualistic. The player plays against him/herself and the other person, the one who has designed the key, simply keeps

"score." The only way for two players to engage is to compete. The one who wins is the one who guesses the key soonest. He or she is the most logical. For another thing, the title of the game "Master Mind" suggests that a master of logic is a master mind and that this sort of mastery is ideal--as ideal as a perfectly logical and ordered world with no in-between colors and no in-between pegs.

What does this game say about U.S. culture? That remains to be argued. This is where I open things up to the class. I ask questions like, "What implications for particular ways of thinking, being in the world, and/or seeing the world (lens of class, nation, biology, etc.) might the game contain? What might it say about the U.K. where it was also being produced in 1972? What sorts of historical developments might it have been reflecting at that time? What might we make of its strengths? (can be played by the deaf and comes in a braille version for the blind) What do you make of the gender dynamic on the box top?"

Another way to get students communicating in self-reflexive ways about culture is to expose them to exemplars. One cultural studies essay I have found extremely useful in conjunction with the assignment on games, sports, and toys, takes as its focus the cultural icon: Barbie. The essay is from a book called Skin Trade written by Ann duCille, Harvard University Press, London, 1996.

The first chapter "Toy Theory: Black Barbie and the Deep Play of Difference" is a fifty-nine page commentary on white Barbie, early versions of a black Barbie (originally called Colored Francie), Mattel and its business practices, Earring Magic Ken and

his controversial recall, collectible ethnic Barbies, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and how pretty much everyone ends up being the "other" to Barbie. The reading is accessible and interesting. The entire reading could be assigned, or a teacher could select a section relevant to issues already under discussion in class or in a particular thematic unit.

Students may not be able to write or speak as well as Ann duCille, but they may gain some insight into how to artfully express the content of their paper or speech. Another conceptual tool teachers can give their students is a thoughtfully compiled collection of demographics. That is, teachers should ask about more than simply race, class, and gender--as if these are the only three concerns of cultural studies. They should also ask what might be said about other important demographic factors: age, religion, group affiliations, education level, ethnic background, sexuality, marital status, and/or others.

Teachers could also ask students to look for explicit and implicit rules, rituals, "sacred" symbols, and taboos. They could ask students to take note where, when, and how the limitations and borderlines are set up (Just how much CAN you hit the pinball machine before it says "tilt"?), what players get bonuses for--and how players can cheat. To keep students from producing laundry list answers, teachers should encourage students to see if they can find out how what they are studying fits in with other parts of the culture--and how the parts hang together.

Since this culture is influenced by capitalism, teachers could

suggest students try to find out about how the toy/game is made, who makes it, and how much it costs to make and market. They could also suggest finding out what the manufacturer's stated motivations for making the toy or game are--if there are any beyond the simple profit motive. If its a sport they're exploring, suggest they pay attention to how the sport is packaged and sold--its PR.

This toy, sport, game assignment is a fun assignment but one that takes some understanding of cultural studies to explain. To best help students, teachers need a clear understanding of what they expect students to do. Since it is difficult to be self-reflexive (because we are all immersed in culture), it is important to lay out a theory of culture and cultural studies, to share personal examples, and to provide exemplar essays so that students can produce quality cultural studies analyses. And if all this seems a bit much to do for one assignment then perhaps you could import the spirit of this assignment into your other assignments. If any part of this assignment helps you talk about cultures as communicative, as fluid, as multiple, and as practices of everyday life, then feel free to borrow from whatever parts you find helpful.

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